Psychological perfectionism and the paradox of obligation

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> Perfectionistic individuals portray themselves as both saints and sinners because they "can describe themselves, in the very same sentence, as both better than everyone else and worse than everyone else "[1]

Justifying the inclusion of supererogatory acts into a moral theory involves an articulation of how an act can be good and yet not morally required. In this paper, I argue that one approach is to appeal to the potential consequences of adhering to a demanding moral theory – one where all actions of moral significance are either morally required or morally forbidden – by exploring the work on psychological perfectionism. Psychological perfectionism is, I argue, the non-moral analogue of a demanding moral theory. The evidence demonstrates that by demanding of themselves that they reach high non-moral standards, perfectionists make it less likely that they will reach their goals. I argue that this gives us reason to believe that there is a 'paradox of obligation': that *requiring* agents to meet exceedingly high moral standards will have the effect of making them *less* likely to meet them. Thus, just as perfectionists are encouraged to draw a distinction between being their best and being good enough, I argue that the solution to the paradox of obligation is to place limits on what we require of ourselves and others. We ought to, at the very least, *consider* some actions to

[1] Sorotzkin, "Understanding and Treating Perfectionism in Religious Adolescents," 91. Discussed in Flett and Hewitt, "Positive Versus Negative Perfectionism in Psychopathology A Comment on Slade and Owens's Dual Process Model," 487.

be supererogatory. I also draw on the literature on perfectionism to argue that this does not mean that we are forced to accept a 'morality of complacency.' The literature makes clear that it is possible to still aim high *without* considering ourselves required to do so.

Introduction

Justifying the existence of supererogatory acts involves explaining how an act can be good to do and yet one that we are not required to perform. In this paper, I present a strategy that should be of interest to the most recalcitrant of anti-supererogationists, such as act consequentialists, who insist all morally significant actions are either morally required or morally forbidden. I challenge, not the particular demands that these theories make, but the demandingness of these theories: the lack of room they leave for optional acts. While there are many good reasons to challenge theories that fail to make room for optional acts, the avenue of attack I present here is to argue that a particular problem arises for theories that require agents to meet exceedingly high standards: that requiring agents to meet these high standards will have the effect of making them less likely to do so. I call this the 'paradox of obligation'. It is paradoxical because, as I explore, requiring an action is thought to make agents *more* likely to perform the act in question, whereas the opposite if often true. Additionally, I call it a paradox of obligation intending it to be reminiscent of the paradox of hedonism, as I believe they raise similar sorts of challenges. William Bennett famously said that "Happiness is like a cat, if you try to coax it or call it, it will avoid you, it will never come. But if you pay it no attention and go about your business, you'll find it rubbing up against your legs and jumping into your lap." Based on thoughts like this, the paradox of hedonism claims that by aiming for pleasure or happiness, we are less likely to experience it. The classic response to the paradox of hedonism is to claim that it does not challenge hedonism as a *criterion of rightness*: those acts that lead to the maximisation of pleasure really are the right things to do; it only challenges hedonism as an *action-guiding theory*. When we go about attempting to do what is right according to hedonism, the paradox of hedonism teaches us that we ought not to do so directly; if our actions are guided by the pursuit of pleasure, we will thereby fail to maximise it. Thus, the paradox of hedonism *does* challenge hedonism as an action-guiding theory, the latter of which is an important component of any moral theory that is to instruct us how to act. My paradox of obligation presents a similar challenge: while it may not undermine a demanding moral theory as a criterion

of rightness, it does undermine such a theory as an action-guiding theory. The result is that even those who adhere to a demanding moral theory as a criterion of rightness should still at least *consider* some acts to be supererogatory, on the action-guiding component of their theory.[2] This significantly narrows the scope of the anti-supererogationist position.

I briefly consider a challenge that might be raised to this, that it endorses a sort of moral complacency, a satisfaction with meeting the low bar of being 'good enough' or 'not bad'. However, the psychological literature is of help here too: it gives us reason to hope that we can aim high without considering ourselves obliged.

Obligations and psychological perfectionism

The nature of obligations

Supererogatory acts are distinguished from obligations because supererogatory acts are, by definition, not required. Therefore, establishing the possibility of supererogatory acts depends on the sense of 'required' at play in that definition. The sense of 'required' must be one that is beyond that of 'ought'. This is because there are some senses of 'ought' whereby supererogatory actions can as easily be understood acts that ought to be done: for example, a supererogatory act is one that ought to be done if 'ought' simply means good to do, or favoured by the balance of reasons, or yielding a state of affairs that ought to be. This is unproblematic because there are senses of 'ought' that are distinct from obligation. What needs to be identified, therefore, is what the notion of 'obligation' adds beyond the notion of 'ought'. The answer I believe is in the force that obligations have.

The language of obligations mirrors that of necessity. Obligations are things that we *must* keep. If we are obliged to do something, then we *have to* do it. This can be contrasted with 'ought'. Kai von Fintel and Sabine Iatridou ask their readers to consider the following sign, posted at a summer camp on Cape Cod: "After using the bathroom, everybody ought to wash their hands; employees have to."[3] We can see here that in ordinary usage obligations exhibit strong necessity in contrast to 'ought'. Beyond ordinary usage, this is also evident in the consequences of failing to do what is obligatory. Firstly, when we fail to do what is

[2] Some may claim that it also presents a challenge for an adequate criterion of rightness. If so, then this is all to the good a defence of supererogation. However, I want to demonstrate that, even if this is not claims, the scope of an anti-supererogationist position is still limited.

[3] Fintel and Iatridou, "How to Say Ought in Foreign: The Composition of Weak Necessity Modals," 116.

obligatory, we thereby do something forbidden; performing a forbidden act is often seen as a serious moral failing which can say something about us much more generally. If I tell a lie, then I could be considered a liar; if I commit an act of murder, then I am a murderer. It does not count equally heavily all the occasions on which I have not lied or have not murdered. Secondly, when we fail to do what is obligatory, then punishment, reprisals, criticism and guilt are often considered appropriate. Indeed, some, such as Mary Forrester, go so far as to *define* obligatory acts as those such that "some sanction or other, whether mild or severe, ought to be available in cases of breach of obligation. If no sanction whatever ought to be used," she continues, "then the act in question is not an obligation."[4]

Unlike in the case of obligations, however, failures to perform supererogatory actions lead to neither of the above consequences. Omissions of supererogatory actions are permissible; therefore, failing to perform a supererogatory action does not say something negative about us or reflect negatively on our character more generally. Also, neither sanctions nor punishments are appropriate for failing to perform a supererogatory act. As David Heyd argues, it is a defining feature of a supererogatory act that "Its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism – either formal or informal."[5] He claims that "Only strict anti-supererogationists maintain that failure to act supererogatorily deserves and should entail condemnation in the same way as failure to do one's duty does."[6] If an act is optional, then its omission is immune from any criticism. This, Heyd argues, is true therefore of all supererogatory acts, even for omissions of the simplest of favours.[7] Of course, immunity from criticism does not mean that we cannot recommend or encourage such behaviour, an issue I return to later in this paper.[8] Demanding moral theories, therefore, are those the-

[4] Forrester, "Some Remarks on Obligation, Permission, and Supererogation," 220.

[5] Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory*, 115.

[6] Ibid., 125.

[7] Of course, sometimes people *do* criticise those who omit supererogatory acts. However, this is does not undermine Heyd's point, which is that such criticism is not justified. Also, there are times when acts that seem supererogatory may well be obligatory given that they involve very little cost to the agent or because they are constitutive of certain relationships and so on. In these case, criticism for failing to perform them is warranted.

[8] Heyd also argues that supererogatory acts "cannot be described as something which *ought* to be done" (Ibid.) However, this I believe overstates his case. It is not necessary to claim that supererogatory acts cannot be described as ones that ought to be done on *every* possible interpretation of 'ought'. It is enough that supererogatory actions are in no way obligatory. Heyd claims that they are not acts that ought to be done in order to resist any argument that they are imperfect duties. However, I believe that imperfect duties are ones that we *have* to do some of the time, or through some means of our choice, or so on. This means that sanctions would be appropriate if we never performed them at any time. Therefore, the immunity from criticism is enough to

ories that are anti-supererogationist because they leave no room for optional acts, as they consider every act of moral significance to be either morally required or morally forbidden. I turn now to outlining psychological perfectionism and to demonstrating its analogy with demanding moral theories.

Psychological perfectionism

The 'perfectionism' of interest here is 'psychological perfectionism,' a separate notion from the 'perfectionism' we might find in moral, political or value theory. In a definition that captures the heart of almost all definitions of psychological perfectionism, Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate describe it as the setting of excessively high standards "which are accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one's own behaviour."[9] The descriptions of perfectionism and perfectionists reveal important similarities with moral requirements. Firstly, the standards and rules the perfectionists require themselves to abide by often have the same form of strong necessity as moral obligations: for a perfectionist, it is not just that 'I ought to be working all the time', but 'I *have to* be working all the time'; it is not just that 'my talk should be perfect', but 'my talk *must* be perfect.' The prescriptive form of these standards and rules is a marked feature; indeed Karen Horney characterises perfectionism as "the tyranny of the shoulds."[10]

Secondly, and due to the prescriptive force of these standards, perfectionists are often preoccupied with what is referred to as 'concern over mistakes': a fear of failing to meet the standards in question.[11] Perfectionism has been defined by some as "the tendency to believe there is a perfect solution to every problem, that doing something perfectly (i.e., mistake-free) is not only possible, but also necessary, and that even minor mistakes will have serious consequences."[12] Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt cite many studies that demonstrate

deny that they are a type of imperfect duty without needing to claim that they are not acts that ought to be done in any sense of the term.

[9] Frost et al., "The Dimensions of Perfectionism," 450.

[10] Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*.

[11] Frost et al. hypothesised five dimensions that contribute to total perfectionism. Concern over mistakes constituted the dimensions most strongly correlated with (negative) perfectionism, though not with positive perfectionism as distinguished later in this paper. (Frost et al., "A Comparison of Two Measures of Perfectionism.")

[12] Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, "Cognitive Assessment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder."

perfectionism to be "associated with a fear of failure and an inability to tolerate failure."[13] As with obligations, for perfectionists, even small failures to meet their standards can have serious, negative consequences. This can be seen by a therapeutic technique used to help those with perfectionism. Perfectionists are asked to think about the 'or…' that follows a statement that begins with 'I must…' or 'I should…' or 'I have to…' So 'I must read absolutely everything on this subject before starting my work' might be followed by 'or I will look stupid and lazy.' 'I have to be working all the time' might be followed by 'or I will fail all my exams and never be able to get a job.' Perfectionists also believe that failures to meet the standards on a particular occasion can say something about them much more generally, as a person, or a family member, or an employee. This is partly due to a cognitive bias that is caused by concern over mistakes. Roz Shafran et al. demonstrate

> that people with clinical perfectionism evaluate their standards and performance in a biased way. Such biases include selective attention to 'failure' and the discounting of 'success'. This involves paying more attention to perceived or actual errors in performance than to the parts of performance that were error-free.[14]

Just as with failures to meet our obligations, perfectionists also believe that punishment and criticism are legitimated by failures to meet the standards set. This often constitutes one of the fears perfectionists exhibit about failing to meet the rules and standards set.

On the basis of these striking similarities, I contend that psychological perfectionism is the non-moral analogue of the adherence to a demanding moral theory. They both exhibit standards and rules of strong necessity, where failing to meet these can legitimate criticism and censure; what is more, the consequences of failure are serious, negative and generalise to saying something about the character of the agent. This is of significance because the well-documented consequences of being a perfectionist strongly suggest that adhering to a demanding moral theory would give rise to what I have called the paradox of obligation:

[13] Flett et al., "Components of Perfectionism and Procrastination in College Students" and Flett et al., "Perfectionism, Self-Actualization, and Personal Adjustment." Cited in Flett and Hewitt, "Positive Versus Negative Perfectionism in Psychopathology A Comment on Slade and Owens's Dual Process Model," 481.

[14] Shafran, Cooper, and Fairburn, "Clinical Perfectionism: a Cognitive-Behavioural Analysis," 782. For further evidence of this see Antony and Swinson, *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism*. Burns, "The Perfectionist's Script for Self-Defeat." Hamachek, "Psychodynamics of Normal and Neurotic Perfectionism." Hollender, "Perfectionism."

that by requiring that we meet a high moral standard, we make it less likely that we actually do.

Consequences of perfectionism

The literature on perfectionism often emphasises the effect on the mental health of perfectionists. Perfectionism is usually considered to be a psychopathology that requires addressing in order for the person to have a healthy and satisfying life. This is predominantly because of the correlation between perfectionism and depression and anxiety. This is unsurprising in light of the biases discussed earlier. When we are preoccupied with the avoidance of failure and yet hardly recognise when we meet the standards in question, we are likely to be riddled with fear and guilt. The detrimental effects of someone who holds themselves to demanding non-moral standards are partly attributable to the role that self-criticism plays in the feeling that one is required or obliged to meet such standards. David Dunkley et al. link self-criticism to the link between perfectionism and depressive, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms.[15] As Shafran et al. explain, "The core psychopathology of perfectionism is expressed as a morbid fear of failure and the relentless pursuit of success."[16] This has serious implications for considering ourselves required to do our moral best or even just to meet demanding moral standards, as in the case of anti-supererogationist positions. The consequences are likely to be similar in the case of a demanding moral theory as in the case of perfectionism: depression and anxiety.

What is of concern for establishing my paradox of obligation is the *counter-productivity* of perfectionism. The fear of failure discussed above comes from *requiring* the meeting of exceedingly high standards. This fear, as Don E. Hamachek argues, "leads to avoidance behaviour."[17] By trying to avoid *failing* to meet the standards, we also tend to avoid meeting them too. The evidence for the avoidant behaviour of perfectionistic thinking and the counter-productivity that this entails is well-document and has become central to the definition of perfectionism itself. As Shafran et al. establish, "it is inevitable that for some people the pursuit of their standards and their fear of failure to meet them becomes so aver-

[15] Dunkley et al., "Personal Standards and Evaluative Concerns Dimensions of 'clinical' Perfectionism: A Reply to Shafran et Al. (2002, 2003) and Hewitt et Al.(2003)," 78. Dunkley et al. were, specifically, correlating *negative* perfectionism or perfectionistic *concern* (which I have termed, simply, 'perfectionism' for this part of the paper) with these symptoms.

[16] Shafran, Cooper, and Fairburn, "Clinical Perfectionism: a Cognitive-Behavioural Analysis," 779.

[17] Hamachek, "Psychodynamics of Normal and Neurotic Perfectionism," 28.

sive that they delay beginning tasks (procrastination), abandon them midway or avoid them entirely."[18]

It is the fear and anxiety that accompanies perfectionism that means that avoidant and counter-productive behaviour is engaged in. This fear and anxiety is generated by the *required* nature of the demands that perfectionists place themselves under. We can predict that fear and anxiety would also accompany attempts to adhere to a demanding moral theory, because it too *requires* certain behaviour from agents. We can, therefore, also predict that adherents would similarly engage in avoidant or counter-productive behaviour. If, for example, it was believed that doing one's moral best is required (on pain on sanctions, criticism, guilt, and so on), then agents may avoid situations where they might be called on to do good. They might, for example, become so obsessed with giving money only to the *best* or most efficient charity that they fail to give any money at all.

Thus we arrive, by analogy, at 'the paradox of obligation': considering some actions to be morally obligatory can lead us to be less likely to perform them. The counter-productive nature of perfectionism stems from the fear of failing to meet the standards set. As this is a feature shared by demanding moral theories, we can predict that such fears would also lead to the same type of counter-productive behaviour. Part of the reason for considering an act to be obligatory is to encourage people to perform that act and to hold them to account when they fail to do so. However, the literature on perfectionism demonstrates that this can have the opposite effect. Now the question is what we should do in response to this.

Limiting the demandingness of our moral theory

The therapeutic solution to perfectionism is to encourage perfectionists to acknowledge that there is a state of being 'good enough' or performing a task 'well enough' that is below doing one's utmost or one's best. This involves lowering the standards that perfectionists believe they are required to meet. When we lower the standards that we are required to meet, we open up the way for *exceeding* those standards. By allowing for the possibility of exceeding the standards, the fear of failing to meet them is removed, freeing the agent in question from the counter-productive consequences that would otherwise result.

I contend the solution in the moral case ought to be the same. The level of what is

[18] Ibid., 782. See Antony and Swinson, *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism*; Burns, "The Perfectionist's Script for Self-Defeat"; Frost et al., "The Dimensions of Perfectionism"; Slade and Owens, "A Dual Process Model of Perfectionism Based on Reinforcement Theory."

required must be reduced. Like in the non-moral case, this opens up the way for exceeding what is required. In the moral case, this amounts to allowing for optional actions: actions which are neither morally required nor morally forbidden. They are, additionally, good to do, which is why they were considered required in the first place. In other words, it opens the way for supererogatory actions.[19] A defining feature of supererogatory actions is that their omissions are free from censure. Supererogatory actions, in virtue of not being obligatory, are not accompanied by the fear of failure and concern over mistakes associated with the latter. This eliminates the counter-productive behaviour that results from considering everything morally good, or praiseworthy or right to do to be morally required.

The literature on perfectionism strongly suggests that when we limit what is required, we free people to pursue their intended goals more effectively and make them more responsive to the consequences of their acts.

The paradox of hedonism and the paradox of obligation

I return briefly to the issue of the scope of the paradox raised. This paradox is one of motivation and stems from people *considering* some actions to be required, either morally or non-morally. The solution then is that we *consider* some acts to be optional (thereby opening the way to *consider* some actions supererogatory). Importantly, this does not necessarily entail anything about demanding moral theories *qua* criterions of rightness. However, if correct, my argument does undermine any such theory's claim to being an *action-guiding* theory. To continue with the analogy, just as the paradox of hedonism tells us we ought not be motivated directly by the seeking of pleasure, the paradox of obligation tells us we, at least, ought not be *motivated* directly by an action's being obligatory???i.e. we ought to, at minimum, *consider* some acts to be supererogatory.

The challenge of complacency

I suggested above that the solution to the paradox of obligation for demanding moral theories is to lower the standards. However, lowering standards might seem counterproductive to motivating people to do what is good to do; high standards sounds like they would be

[19] Other conditions, beyond being good and optional, have been offered as necessary for an act being supererogatory. However, as I have argued elsewhere, it is the compossibility of these two features that have been contentious. No one has claimed that given the optionality and goodness are in anyway incompatible with any other proposed condition of supererogatory acts.

more effective for achieving this end. If we lower these standards, then it might seem like simply encouraging people to aim low. This sounds worryingly like a simple endorsement of self-satisfaction with being morally mediocre. Surely, one might argue, perfectionism is preferable to non-perfectionism and, as such, a demanding moral theory is preferable to one of moral complacency. However, this draws a false dichotomy between a demanding moral theory and a complacent one, based on an equally false dichotomy between perfectionism, as described above, and non-perfectionism.

Positive conceptions of perfectionism

As Stoeber and Otto explain:

> "Traditionally, perfectionism has been associated with psychopathology, with psychodynamic theory stressing that perfectionism was a sign of a neurotic and disordered personality (e.g., Horney, 1951; Missildine, 1963)[20]. [...] the dominant view of the 1980s was that perfectionism was always neurotic, dysfunctional, and indicative of psychopathology (e.g. D.D. Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984)[21]."[22]

However, in recent years, many psychologists have started discussing a different type of perfectionism, one that is more positive than the pathological type focused on in previous years. Based on clinical observations and anecdotal evidence, Hamachek proposed that there were two related but separable clusters of features that were ambiguously subsumed under the term 'perfectionism.' He therefore drew a distinction between 'normal' and 'neurotic' perfectionism.[23]

Since Hamachek's seminal work, many other theorists have also drawn distinctions between these two types of perfectionism though few have agreed on the nomenclature. Stoeber and Otto give an overview of the differing terminologies in use: "positive striving and maladaptive evaluative concern (Frost, Heinberg, Holt, Mattia & Neubauer, 1993), active and passive perfectionism (Adkins & Parker, 1996), positive and negative perfectionism (Terry-Short, Owens, Slade & Dewey, 1995), adaptive and maladaptive perfection-

[20] They refer here to Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* and Missildine, *Your Inner Child of the Past*.

[21] They refer here to Burns, "The Perfectionist's Script for Self-Defeat" and Pacht, "Reflections on Perfection."

[22] Stoeber and Otto, "Positive Conceptions of Perfectionism: Approaches, Evidence, Challenges," 296.

[23] Hamachek, "Psychodynamics of Normal and Neurotic Perfectionism."

ism (Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998), functional and dysfunctional perfectionism (Rhéaume, Freeston, et al., 2000), healthy and unhealthy perfectionism (Stumpf & Parker, 2000), personal standards and evaluative concerns perfectionism (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002), and conscientious and self-evaluative perfectionism (Hill et al., 2004)."[24]

In the rest of this paper, I use the following terms for the distinction: *positive perfectionism*, constituted by perfectionistic strivings and exhibited by what Stoeber and Otto call 'healthy perfectionists'; and *negative perfectionism*, constituted by perfectionistic concern and exhibited by what Stoeber and Otto call 'unhealthy perfectionists'. Perfectionistic concern is constituted by 'concern over mistakes'. The perfectionism that has been discussed thus far, therefore, is negative perfectionism. Vitally, perfectionistic striving on the other hand is unrelated to concern over mistake; the studies Stoeber and Otto mention above all conclude that it is possible to have perfectionistic striving *without* perfectionistic concern. It follows from this that it is possible to hold oneself to a high standard and strive to be better *without being (pathologically) concerned about failing to meet one's standards*. As such, it is also possible to do so without beating oneself up when the standards are not met, and so too, then, without becoming fearful, anxious, depressed and avoidant.

Stoeber and Otto give a comprehensive literature review of those studies that distinguish positive and negative perfectionism.[25] According to these studies, when the defining feature of negative perfectionism – concern over mistakes – is removed (as in the case of positive perfectionism), the possibility of healthier individuals, who are more motivated and more successful is revealed. According to the studies Stoeber and Otto consider,

> "only [perfectionistic] concerns were related to higher levels of negative affect

[24] Stoeber and Otto, 'Positive Conceptions of Perfectionism', 295. The works referred to here are Frost et al., "A Comparison of Two Measures of Perfectionism." Adkins and Parker, "Perfectionism and Suicidal Preoccupation." Terry-Short et al., "Positive and Negative Perfectionism." Rice, Ashby, and Slaney, "Self-Esteem as a Mediator Between Perfectionism and Depression: A Structural Equation Analysis." Rhéaume et al., "Functional and Dysfunctional Perfectionists: Are They Different on Compulsive-Like Behaviors?". Stumpf and Parker, "A Hierarchical Structural Analysis of Perfectionism and Its Relation to Other Personality Characteristics." Blankstein and Dunkley, "Evaluative Concerns, Self-Critical, and Personal Standards Perfectionism: A Structural Equation Modeling Strategy." Hill et al., "A New Measure of Perfectionism: The Perfectionism Inventory."

[25] Stoeber and Otto: "the psycINFO database was searched for all publications up to Week 2 of September 2005 with *perfect, perfection, perfectionism, perfectionist, perfectionistic,* or *perfectionists* in the title" and looked for those that investigated the two basic forms of perfectionism under a variety of approaches and labels (see Stoeber and Otto, "Positive Conceptions of Perfectionism: Approaches, Evidence, Challenges," 297.)

> and depression (and unrelated to positive affect). In contrast, [perfectionistic] striving was related to higher levels of positive affect (and unrelated to negative affect and depression). [...] only the perfectionistic concerns dimension related to negative characteristics whereas the perfectionistic strivings dimension related to positive characteristics."[26]

Frost et al. also found the same. They employed the Positive Affect-Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)[27]:

> "The PANAS is a self-report mood scale which contains two orthogonal dimensions. Positive Affect (PA) reflects feelings of energy, enthusiasm, and activity. Negative Affect (NA) reflects feelings of anger, fear, guilt, etc. Pure depressed mood have been associated with a combination of high NA and low PA, while anxiety and the anxiety component of depressive states have been associated with high NA only (Watson & Kendall, 1989)."[28]

They also employed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)[29], "a general measure of severity of depression."[30] They discovered that "The [perfectionistic striving] factor was correlated with PA from the PANAS, while the [perfectionistic concerns] factor was correlated only with NA from the PANAS and the BDI."[31]

The positive consequences of perfectionistic striving without perfectionistic concern are overwhelming:

> "In sum, studies taking a dimensional approach [perfectionistic striving vs. perfectionistic concern] have shown the dimension of perfectionistic strivings to be related to high levels of conscientiousness, extraversion, endurance, positive affect, satisfaction with life, active coping styles, and achievement, and to lower levels of external control and suicidal ideation. Moreover, when overlap with the dimension representing perfectionistic concerns was taken into

[26] Ibid., 297.

[27] This is the PANAS scale outlined in Watson, Clark, and Tellegan, "Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive Affect: The PANAS Scales."

[28] Frost et al., "A Comparison of Two Measures of Perfectionism," 121. For more information see, Watson and Kendall, "Understanding Anxiety and Depression: Their Relation to Negative and Positive Affective States."

[29] See Beck et al., "An Inventory for Measuring Depression."

[30] Frost et al., "A Comparison of Two Measures of Perfectionism," 121.

[31] Ibid., 125–6.

> account, perfectionistic strivings were also related to high levels of perceived social support and lower levels of depression, self-blame, and perceived hassles. Furthermore, studies [...] have found that individuals with high levels of perfectionistic strivings and low levels of perfectionistic concerns (healthy perfectionists) show higher levels of self-esteem, agreeableness, social integration (e.g., greater social interest, greater willingness to go along with others), and academic adaption (e.g., higher grade point average [GPA], greater GPA satisfaction); show lower levels of anxiety, depression, procrastination, defensiveness, maladaptive coping styles, and interpersonal problems; and report fewer somatic complaints and psychological symptoms than individuals with high levels of perfectionistic strivings and high levels of perfectionistic concerns (unhealthy perfectionists) or individuals with low level of perfectionistic strivings (non-perfectionists)."[32]

Reinforcement and punishment

One of the central beliefs of many negative perfectionists is that, without requiring themselves to meet the high standards they set themselves, they would be unable to motivate themselves to do better. The threat of failure, catastrophe, disappointment and censure discussed earlier, they believe, provides motivation without which the alternative is non-perfectionism and therefore a lack of achievement. However, this is simply mistaken. It is possible to hold ourselves to a high standard without relying on the threat of failure and censure. This is what the category of perfectionistic strivings teaches: it is possible to employ positive reinforcers such as pride, praise and achievement to motivate us without the need to employ negative reinforcers such as the avoidance of failure and censure.[33]

Terry-Short et al. demonstrate that "neurotic (negative) perfectionism is that which is a function of avoidance of negative consequences" and that "the concept of Positive Perfectionism is that which is a function of achievement of positive consequences."[34] The carrot

[32] Ibid., 312.

[33] B.F. Skinner, the father of Operant Conditioning, discusses positive and negative reinforcement (as well as positive and negative punishment). For more information, see his "Superstition in the Pigeon." For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Slade and Owens, "A Dual Process Model of Perfectionism Based on Reinforcement Theory."

[34] Terry-Short et al., "Positive and Negative Perfectionism," 667. Here they are specifically referring to the neurotic (negative perfectionism) described by Hamachek, "Psychodynamics of Normal and Neurotic Perfec-

and stick therefore represent two different mechanisms of learning and motivation and it is this difference – between positive and negative reinforcement – that, as Terry-Short et al. argue above, marks the distinction between perfectionistic striving and perfectionistic concern.

There can also be positive and negative reinforcement in the moral case. As established earlier, due to the force that obligations have by their nature, there are serious negative consequences for failing to meet them. This means that performing our duty is negatively reinforced: we avoid punishment that would otherwise be legitimated, such as a sense of moral failing, guilt, shame and the censure and disappointment of others. However, as established in the non-moral case, it is a mistake to think that this is the only form of motivation. Supererogation provides an alternative mechanism of motivation: praise, gratitude and esteem. We can be motivated by these consequences of performing supererogatory acts (rather than by the avoidance of the negative consequences of failing to do our duty). By the very nature of *exceeding* the standard set, we need not be afraid of failing to do so. Meeting a required standard often leaves perfectionists feeling relief at having avoided disaster. However, when we *exceed* a standard the feeling is one of pride. This provides positive encouragement for performing the act in question, which constitutes a much more successful form of motivation than a fear of failure. As the literature on perfectionistic strivings shows, this method of motivation is often much more effective than the avoidance of punishment.

Conclusion

Negative perfectionists, consumed by concerns over failing to meet their standards, often engage in problematic, unhealthy and counter-productive behaviour; positive perfectionists, who aim high but do not consider reaching their targets to be required, are much more likely to be happy, to have increased measures of well-being and to reach the goals set. Thus the problem the literature on psychological perfectionism raises pertains to considering it *required* to meet one's aims. Requiring brings with it a fear of failure, since failure involves serious, negative consequences such as punishment and criticism. These anxiety-inducing consequences cause us to become avoidant and self-defeating. Perfectionistic striving avoids all this without being reduced to complacency. As Frost et al. state "The psychological problems associated with perfectionism are probably more closely as-

tionism." and Slade, "Towards a Function Analysis of Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa."

sociated with [the] critical evaluation tendencies than with the setting of excessively high standards."[35] Just as perfectionistic striving provides an alternative to both perfectionistic concern and non-perfectionism, a supererogationist moral theory provides an alternative to both a demanding moral theory and a complacent or self-satisfied one.

I have shown here that there is a real issue of motivation when it comes to requiring that we meet high moral standards, just as in the non-moral case. The solution I propose is that, at the very least on the action-guiding level, we should consider some actions to be supererogatory. We should lower the standards so that it is not the case that all morally significant acts are either morally required or morally forbidden. This opens up the possibility of going beyond what is required of us. By doing this we make it much more likely that we will do what is required and go far beyond it as well, reaching our goals in a way made nearly impossible on a more demanding moral theory.

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